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Charges of spying renew jet dispute

By Donald Neff
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A claim in a British magazine that the South Korean airliner shot down by a Russian pilot last fall was on a spy mission involving the space shuttle Challenger renewed the war of words yesterday between the United States and the Soviet Union over the incident that took 269 lives.

Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger labeled the report in the Defense Attache periodical as a repetition of a "set of lies" by the Soviet Union to hide their "cold-blooded murder."

"There is absolutely nothing remotely resembling any kind of spy mission that that plane was on," Mr. Weinberger said in an interview on CBS Morning News. The Soviets, he added, "have been trying desperately to hide the fact that they've murdered 269 people without the slightest provocation whatever."

What Mr. Weinberger could have pointed out, but did not, was the fact that the Challenger 8 mission, which was launched Aug. 30, carried

no classified experiments, according to John McLeaish, chief spokesman of NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, Texas.

Given the fish-bowl existence of astronauts in orbit, where their movements are plotted in detail on the flight plan and can be monitored by reporters, NASA has made a practice of announcing in advance when a secret Defense Department program was aboard. Challenger 8 listed no secret programs.

Except for the charge that the Challenger was involved in a mission to spy over the Soviet Union,

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the Defense Attache article did not significantly add to spying charges made previously by the Russians. But not even the Soviets have implicated the Challenger up to now.

Yesterday, the Soviet news agency Tass countered Mr. Weinberger's remarks in a story filed from Washington saying that the Reagan administration has "clearly been flustered" by the

British magazine report and felt "compelled to resort again to a usual method, unfounded denials."

The Tass story said the Defense Attache article "cited fresh convincing evidence of the fact that the United States staged an anti-Soviet spy action with the use of a South Korean plane last September."

The Defense Attache is published six times a year and enjoys a good reputation in the British defense establishment for its authoritative articles, according to defense experts here.

Its story on the KAL incident, signed with the pseudonym "P.Q. Mann" reportedly in order to protect the writer's identity, claimed that the Korean Air Lines 747 was deliberately routed over Soviet territory. The purpose, said the article, was to touch off Soviet emergency military communications, especially high priority circuits between the Asian command and Moscow.

These activated communications systems could then be analyzed for their capabilities by a U.S. Ferret electronic reconnaissance satellite and the space shuttle Challenger, both of which were aloft at the time, the article maintained.

Since the Sept. 1 incident, the United States has heatedly claimed that the civilian passenger plane had innocently strayed off course because of a navigational error and was shot down without provocation. The Soviet Union has been equally fervent in accusing it of having been on a spying mission.

The Defense Attache report supports the Soviet version. But it would appear to be seriously flawed in at least one major area: its contention that the space shuttle Challenger was an integral part of any spy plot.

The Challenger flight plan, which governs the minute-by-minute activities of the astronauts during a mission, shows no periods of secret activity. "There was no secret program in the whole flight," said Mr. McLeaish. "The story is without any foundation whatever."

In a spy-obsessed world, of course, it is possible that the mission was so secret that the Pentagon prevented publication of even the fact that Challenger had a secret program — but unlikely.

Reporters covering space shots routinely examine the flight plan for unexplained periods of unidentified activity and demand explanations for any gaps. More importantly, the astronauts themselves — who include a number of civilian scientists — have traditionally been leery of mixing civil and military activities in space.

One source close to the program said that if the shuttle astronauts had been involved in an incident that had taken 269 innocent lives, they would have been angry and distressed at having been made to take part in such a mission. He added that by now one of them most likely would have voiced his complaints publicly.

In addition, such a mission would have met resistance beyond just the astronauts.

Although it is true that the manned flight program has increasingly come under Defense Department influence in recent years, there remains a strong feeling among many of the scientists and technicians in NASA that military functions should be strictly limited. Manned flight, they believe, should have as its priority the probing of the mysteries of space — and be as free of military programs as possible.